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A Byte Christmas

Don't look for Santa near the chimney — he's on the computer

By Joshua Quittner

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Santa Claus has come to the Net. Actually, three of them. Good little boys and girls with access to computers and the Internet, the global network of interconnected networks, can send electronic mail to him, er, them. That pool of prospective users includes anyone with access to the Prodigy, Compu-

Serve, America Online, GEnie and Delphi on-line computer services.

And these Net Santas will respond.

Santa started on the Net five years ago, on MCImail, an electronic mail service that was among the first to attach to the Internet. You can still reach him there. He also has an address at santa@csgi.com. But the most recent address for Santa, one that turned up for the first time this

year, and seems to be attracting a huge amount of mail, is this one: santa@north.pole.org.

"He's gotten well over 6,000 messages already, from all over the world," said Carl Malamud, helper for the north.pole.org Santa. Malamud, during the off season, is president of the Internet Multicasting Service, in Washington, D.C., which sends audio programming over the Net.

Malamud said the volume of e-mail ("I'm sitting here sorting through 800 messages that came in last night . . .") is no problem for his bearded boss. The holiday hacker devised a high-tech way to pipe messages back to kids dreaming of a byte Christmas: The Santomatic Perl Script, a computer language that allows Santa's computer to automatically browse letters to him, look for requests and send back a customized reply.

The Wired Generation's most frequent request?

"Cindy Crawford," said Malamud, noting that more than 200 requests have come in so far for the supermodel. Not her picture, mind you, the model herself. "We had a whole sixth-grade class of boys ask that Cindy Crawford be sent to them."

The Santomatic Perl Script's response: "Don't hold your breath."